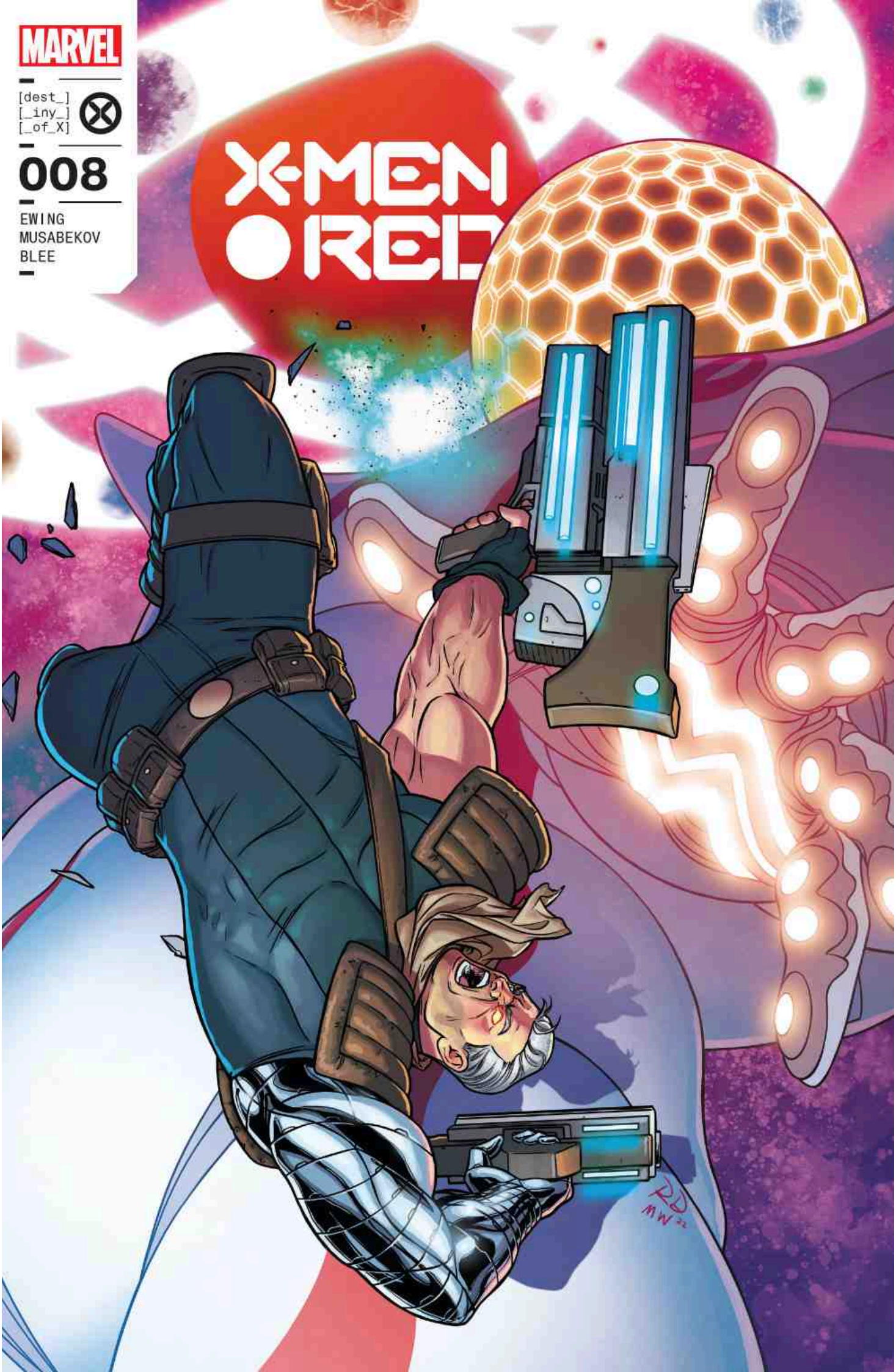
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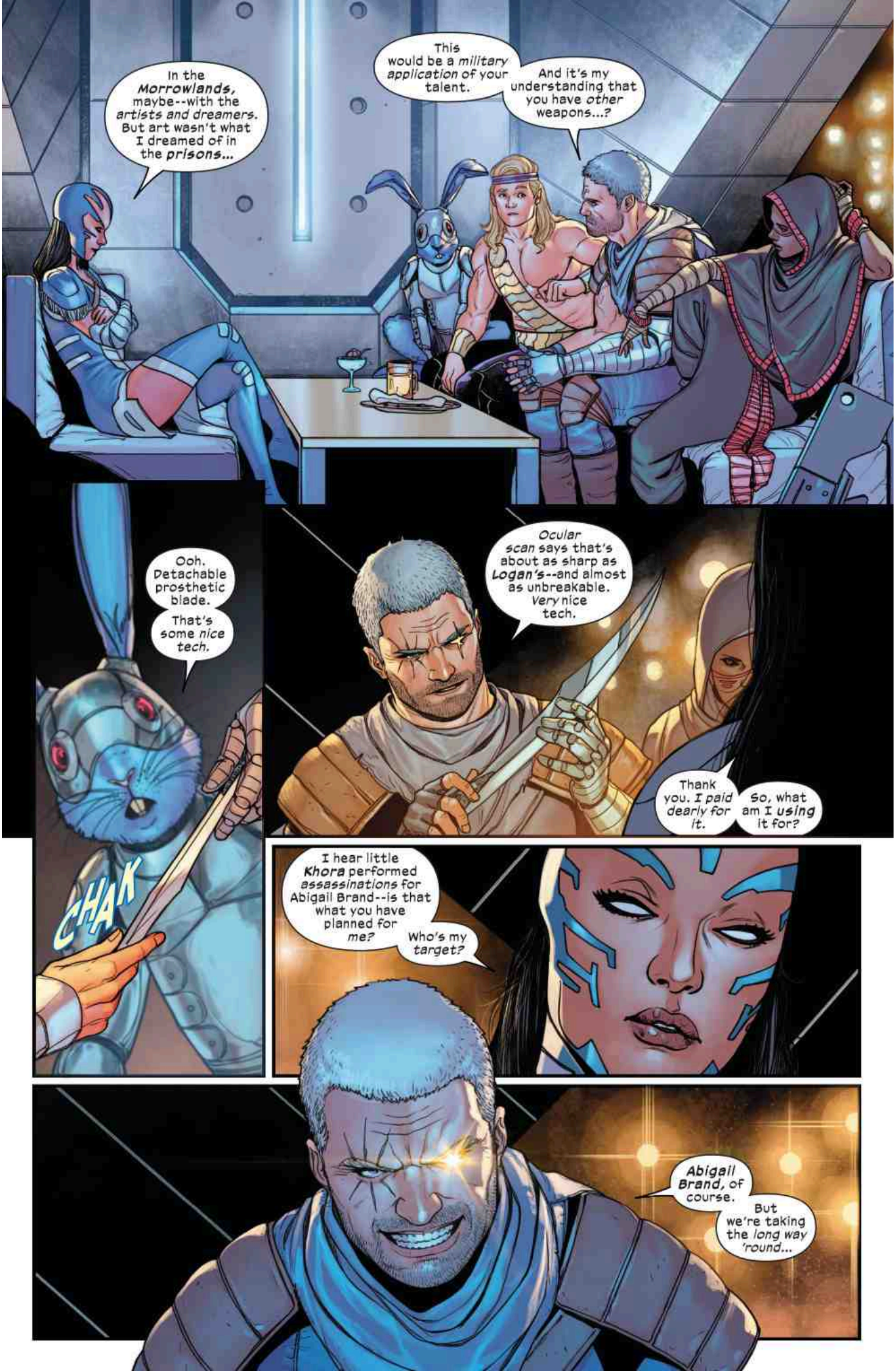
EWING
MUSABEKOV
BLEE
X-MEN
RED

GOSNELL'S BAR ON DOLO-MAYAN. WHERE THE GALAXY'S MERCENARY ELITE DRINK AWAY THEIR BATTLES.
They told me this was where the galaxy's *mercenary elite* drank away their battles.
You are not what I pictured.
...
How so?
It was a *mistake* to leave Arakko. I left a planet at *peace*--and it plunged into ***war***. A war I could have found *purpose* in.
The only things I've found out here are *treaties* and *talking animals*...
Yeah, with the Guardians doing all the hero-type stuff for *free*, merc jobs are *thin on the ground* right now.
Me and the Prince of Power here mostly do ***repo work*** and have ***wacky adventures***...
Still, the universe is a *big place*--bigger than it *used* to be, even. Lot of room for things to go *sideways*, right?
Patience and time, that's *this* old rabbit's motto. If you can't find any ***trouble*** out there...
...it's probably busy finding ***you***.
Weaponless Zsen!
...
So I see...

Sister.
Khora. Did Father send you?
I know he's returned from his shadows--but I won't speak to him again. Not after what happened.
And he feels the same, Zsen.
But... I sent myself.
This is Cable the Askani'son. We worked together.
He has a job.
A job? Hey, if you need an extra set of paws--or some seriously toned muscles--Blackjack O'Hare (and Associate) can supply...
Don't call us, we'll call you, Blackjack.
But Khora says you have an ability that might be useful, Zsen...


In the Morrowlands, maybe--with the artists and dreamers. But art wasn't what I dreamed of in the prisons...
This would be a military application of your talent.
And it's my understanding that you have other weapons...?
Ooh. Detachable prosthetic blade.
That's some nice tech.
CHAK
Ocular scan says that's about as sharp as Logan's--and almost as unbreakable. Very nice tech.
Thank you. I paid dearly for it.
So, what am I using it for?
I hear little Khora performed assassinations for Abigail Brand--is that what you have planned for me?
Who's my target?
Abigail Brand, of course.
But we're taking the long way 'round...

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X-MEN RED

THE LONG WAY 'ROUND

The devastation unleashed on Arakko by Uranos has fractured the Great Ring, Arakko's ruling body. Magneto valiantly fell in battle and Isca the Unbeaten resigned in shame after murdering Idyll the Future Seer. Although Storm ceded her seat to Lodus Logos and claimed Magneto's as her own, the resultant power vacuum has yet to be filled.

Recent events have left intergalactic politics quite unstable. For the opportunist Abigail Brand, this could leave ample room for scheming... if her agents of S.W.O.R.D. trusted her. With the help of Wiz-Kid, Cable capitalized on Brand's resurrection to discover her true motives -- and he did not like what he found...

[CABLE]

[ABIGAIL BRAND]

[THUNDERBIRD]

[MANIFOLD]

[KHORA OF THE BURNING HEART]

[WIZ-KID]

[WEAPONLESS ZSEN]

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X-MEN created by **Stan Lee & Jack Kirby**

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EMERGENCY DIPLOMATIC MEETING :: CODE RED

LOCATION: LAKE HELLAS DIPLOMATIC ZONE.
IN DISPUTE: KREE/SKRULL ALLIANCE, SHI'AR EMPIRE.
FULL DIPLOMATIC PRIVILEGES INVOKED.
ESCALATION POTENTIAL: SEVERE. ****
**LISTED ATTENDEES ARE AS FOLLOWS: **

Empress Xandra of the Shi'ar		**SHI'AR EMPIRE**	Current Leader of the Shi'ar Empire.	Due to attend.
Gladiator		**SHI'AR EMPIRE**	Superguardian Leader. Sworn to the Empress Xandra's service.	Present.
Deathbird		**SHI'AR EMPIRE**	Aide and bodyguard to Empress Xandra. Sister to the late Empress Lilandra.	Due to attend.
Kl'rt, the Super-Skrull		**KREE/SKRULL ALLIANCE**	Galactic Council representative for the Kree/Skrull Alliance.	Unable to attend for personal reasons.
Paibok, the Power Skrull		**KREE/SKRULL ALLIANCE**	Ambassador to the Sol System for the Kree/Skrull Alliance. Attending in place of Kl'rt.	Present.
Ororo of the Storm		**SOL SYSTEM**	Galactic Council representative for the Sol System.	Unable to attend. No reason given.
Frenzy		**SOL SYSTEM**	Chief Diplomat for S.W.O.R.D. and the Lake Hellas Diplomatic Zone. Attending in place of Ororo.	Present.
The Man Called Nova		**GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY**	He stood when all else fell. He stands when all is lost. *The Broken Land sees him.* Richard Rider is *of Arakko.*	Present.

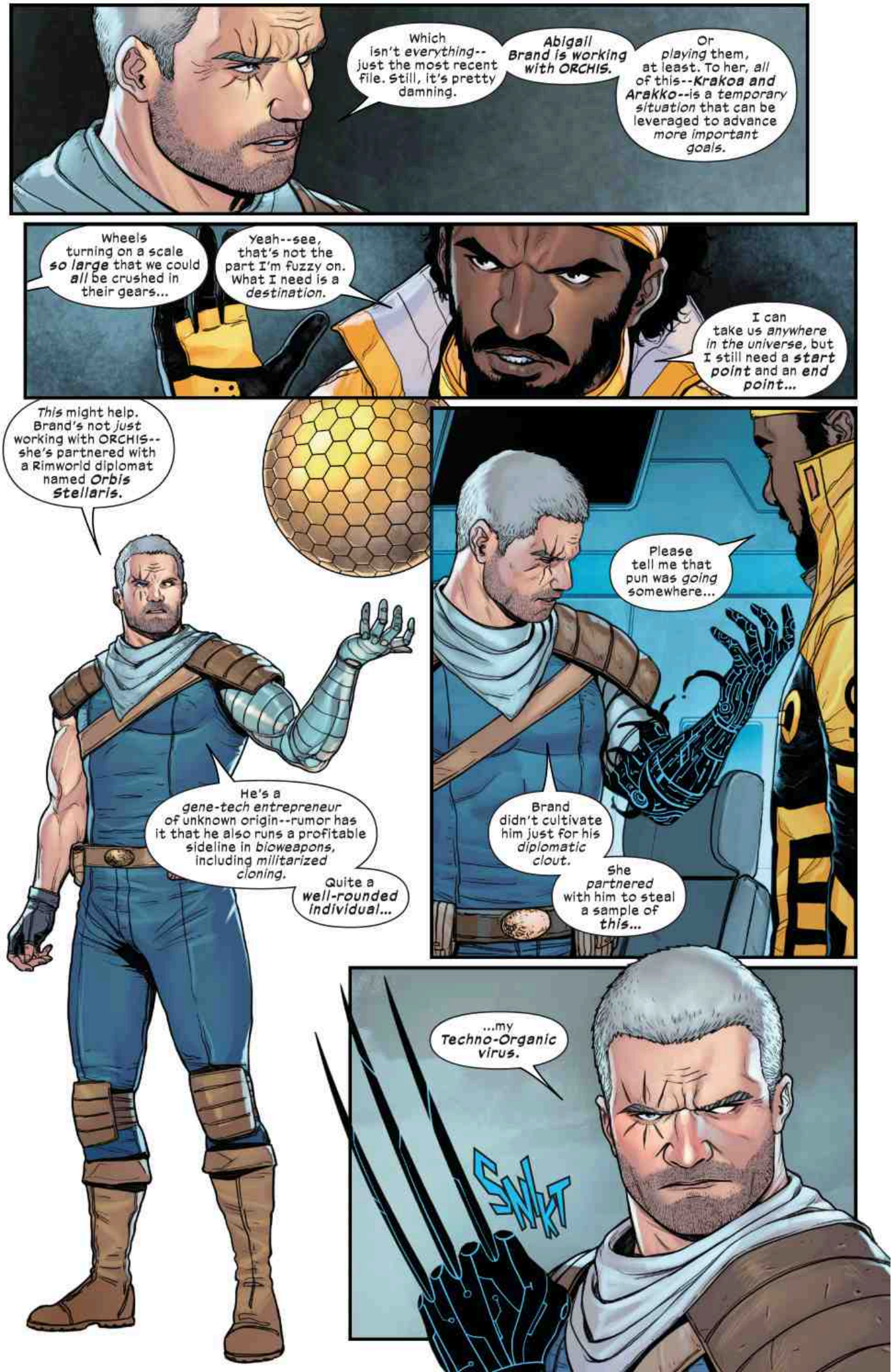
ARAKKO.
THE DIPLOMATIC ZONE.
I should say before we start that our Emperor considers this a highly delicate matter.
As in all things, he wishes to avoid war...
Is that why the Kree/Skrull Empire sent their second most important diplomatic envoy to meet with our Empress? To avoid an insult?
Play nice, Gladiator.
It's a fair question. Normally, the Super-Skrull would be present for this meeting...
...but he swore an oath not to commit murder in the Emperor's service.
And he doesn't quite trust himself to keep it.
The old saying is true, then--a Skrull's mask will always slip.
And no Ororo either. Again, the Voice of Sol has no time to speak to us...
A prior conflict--emphasis on the "conflict." Auditions for the empty seats of the Great Ring, I suspect.
But you'll find me a fair mediator in whatever dispute this is.
Like the man said, Paibok--play nice.
Of course, Frenzy. I always do...

S.W.O.R.D. STATION ONE COMMAND DECK. THE GREEN ROOM.
Is it my imagination, or are they *flirting?* I thought Frenzy only had eyes for **Scott Summers.**
Oh my god, does Paibok shape-shift into Scott Summers?
I don't pay you to *gossip,* Mentallo.
Well, **excuuuuse me.** Is the grand plan not going to *plan,* Boss?
Let's *hope* it is. But Xandra's running *late*--and I don't think **Paibok's** in a mood to wait for her.
But if **this** doesn't lure her to Arakko, I don't know what *will.*
And then there's **Storm.**
It's fine if she doesn't *turn up*--as long as she's where I can *see* her. But she's not on Krakoa *or* Arakko--at least, nowhere we have eyes on.
"So where *is* she?"
I'd like to tell you a **story,** Gladiator.
Roughly three standard decades ago, there was a *lull* in the Kree/Skrull War. *Peace talks* were in progress.
At which time, the Kree received word of a *breach* of the **Pan-Worlds Arms Treaty.**
The Skrulls--**my people**--were allegedly conducting *forbidden genetic weapons research* at a *secret facility...*
...codenamed **Shapeless Ridge.**

"The Kree Command decided that a small force of stealth warriors could destroy the facility where a larger force might fail.
"The experimental Kree Super-Soldier, Captain Glory, led that force. He succeeded admirably--massacring every soul there.
"In fact, they barely put up a fight...
"...because Shapeless Ridge did not make weapons. It was a treatment facility for wounded Skrulls no longer able to shape-shift. Civilians, by any measure.
"The intelligence was wrong.
"The Kree refused to admit the error. So we swore revenge--and the war flared up again, more bitter than ever."
New information, however, has now come to light.
The Kree did not make their error alone. They were fed false reports designed specifically to goad them into a war atrocity.
Who would do such a thing, Gladiator?
I--I don't know what you're--
We would.

The Shi'ar spread those lies in order to prolong the Kree/Skrull War--for our own strategic benefit.
It is one of the Ten Shames that our Kin Crimson sought to bury.
The crimes of previous Shi'ar regimes...
Empress Xandra...!
...that we must now pay for.
In full measure.
There she is.
It's showtime.

ONE PARSEC FROM OOLO-MAYAN.
Okay. The pieces are in place--it's *showtime*, folks.
Welcome to the good ship...
...though when it comes to *long distance*, I'll defer to our resident ***Everywhere Man.***
Ready to get us where we need to be, Manifold?
Mostly. There's a few details I'm still *fuzzy* on...
...well, it's either "*Bebop II*" or "*Brett Anderson*" at this point, I haven't decided.
It's *whatever you want it to be*, Wiz-Kid. With *your* mutant ability, that's a ***literal fact.***
Anything from a *sleek fighter* to a *long-distance exploratory vessel*...
Might as well bring everyone up to *speed*, then.
Recently, ***Abigail Brand*** triggered the *resurrection protocols.*
But a resurrection via *Cerebro backup* only goes *so far.*
That means when she came out of the *egg*, the first thing she did was check her *files* to see what she was *missing*...
...but *we* were checking them too.
And we saw ***everything.***


Which isn't *everything*--just the most recent file. Still, it's pretty damning.
Abigail Brand is working with ORCHIS.
Or *playing* them, at least. To her, *all* of this--**Krakoa and Arakko**--is a *temporary situation* that can be leveraged to advance *more important goals.*
Wheels turning on a scale **so large** that we could **all** be crushed in their gears...
Yeah--see, that's not the part I'm fuzzy on. What I need is a *destination.*
I can take us *anywhere in the universe,* but I still need a **start point** and an **end point...**
This might help. Brand's not *just* working with ORCHIS--she's partnered with a Rimworld diplomat named **Orbis Stellaris.**
He's a *gene-tech entrepreneur* of unknown origin--rumor has it that he also runs a profitable sideline in *bioweapons,* including *militarized cloning.*
Quite a **well-rounded individual...**
Please tell me that pun was *going* somewhere...
Brand didn't cultivate him just for his *diplomatic clout.*
She *partnered* with him to steal a sample of **this...**
...my **Techno-Organic virus.**
SNIKT

Impressive.
It has its *uses*, or I'd have ditched it at my first resurrection. But *controlling* it takes work.
I'm guessing she sent a sample to ORCHIS to keep them *sweet*--
--but knowing Brand, she's got ***bigger*** plans.
Luckily, so do ***I***.
Hey--
Relax-- it won't infect you. My telekinesis keeps it on a leash.
See, my virus is based on the more common ***Technarch*** strain, but tweaked by ***Apocalypse***. It's *unique to me*...
...and whatever sample ***Orbis*** has is unique to me too.
There are only two places in the universe where that *particular* viral load is found. One is in *the palm of your hand*.
Can you find the other?
...Yeah.
I know where it is.

It's far--out beyond everything. The gulf between the galaxies.
I can get us there, but getting us back...
You caught a space station. I have faith.
You just build the gate...
...and I'll take us through!
...
Pretty nice view.
It's called the World Farm, Thunderbird.
Home of the Progenitors--ancient alien super-scientists. The ones who attacked Arakko to steal my T-O virus.
I was assuming Stellaris was using Progenitor clones, though.
If he's got access to the real ones...

We take 'em down, Junior. Just the same.
We're here to find out how deep Brand's plans go. That means we don't quit until we hit bottom.
No matter what's in our way.
I like this one.
You would.
I know I'm ready to find out more.
Brand really had me fooled...
Me too-- before I had a few decades to think about it.
We need someone to stay on the ship though, Taki. And since you're the one who built it...
Pfft. You're lucky I still owe you for the brain thing.
Manifold--can you get us closer? I don't want to have to hunt for a needle in an artificial solar system...
It's tricky with a start point this far out-- but sure.
Just brace yourselves...
...for a sudden drop!
Have a nice trip, gang--

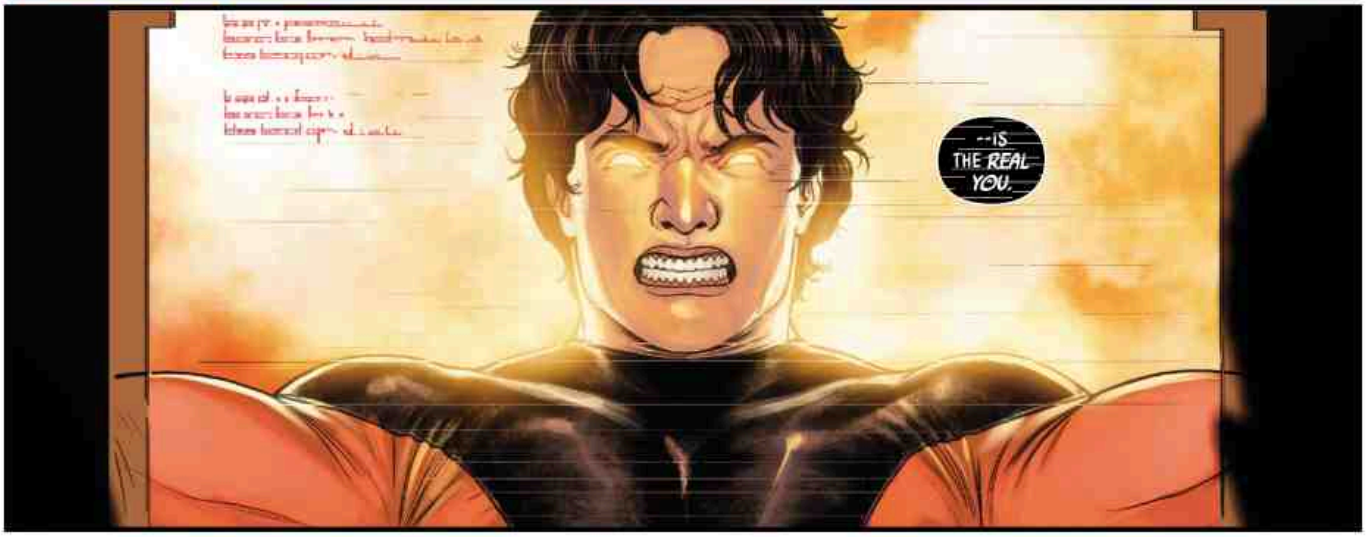
See yrkkrzzt--
--krrzz--
We lost the Kid--
Pretty sure these planet-sized habitrails block communication signals.
Might be a problem for me too-- I'm not seeing any windows in here, and I need to see outside before I can open a portal beyond this room...
We'll cross that Einstein-Rosen bridge when we come to it.
In the meantime, it looks like you got us into the right place--
--that's the same Techno-Organic virus the Progenitors took from me. Looks like they've been breeding it.
Which answers some questions--but not all of them.
Why would the Progenitors ally with Orbis Stellaris? Why would he pursue their goals?
And what does Abigail Brand get out of...
...ah.

This mob's some *scary business*...
The Arakkii are not *easily* intimidated by *mummies in glass coffins*...but something is *hidden* in these sleepers.
If I painted *their* truth, *none* could gaze on it and *remain sane*.
Don't get *distracted*, Junior. Unless Brand's in the *alien-dracula* business, it ain't *our* business.
We'll soon find out.
There's a *data file* connected to these caskets-- I think I can access it without tripping any *alarms*...
...there.
YOU HAVE GOOD IN YOU.

SOME SMALL MICROSCOPIC MEASURE THAT--GIVEN FERTILE SOIL--COULD GROW INTO SOMETHING MORE. IT'S A CANCER...
AND THAT IS UNACCEPTABLE FOR THE WORK WE HAVE SET IN FRONT OF YOU.
SO WE'VE SEPARATED THE TWO. INSIDE--HIDDEN UNDER A THIN LAYER OF THAT GOOD--

--IS THE BEAUTIFUL BROKEN CREATURE YOU ARE.
Who is? Who are they talking about?
It's a nano-camera recording. I can't control the angle...
WE'RE GOING TO RELEASE YOU BACK INTO YOUR UNIVERSE. THEY WILL SEE YOU AS CHANGED--REBORN, HEALTHY AND WHOLE. BUT THAT IS JUST A SHELL.

UNDERNEATH IT--BURIED ALIVE IN A SHALLOW GRAVE--
My god.


--IS THE REAL YOU.

Vulcan's mysterious return from the *Fault*. Right at the dawn of the Krakoan Age. It was *orchestrated*.
They *knew* we'd take him in. Scott wanted...we *all* wanted him to be *whole*...
The perfect sleeper agent.
Wait--this is *all* Abby? The *space lab between galaxies* is *Abby*...?
Why not? She's playing *Krakoa*. She's playing *ORCHIS*.
Why wouldn't she be playing the *Progenitors*...?
So *little* imagination.
You keep saying "*the Progenitors*."
BRA-KROOM
When I think what you *mean*, Mr. Summers...
...is *my* Progenitors.

THE DIPLOMATIC ZONE.

You speak of payment in full measure, your Majesty.
I wonder if you know what that means.
What price can possibly be paid for evil on this scale? I fear it is already set in stone, Majestrix.
I fear it is total war.
What...?
Over my dead body. Hell, over Hulkling's dead body--
Then so it will be, Nova. If the Gods themselves stood in the way of vengeance--for this, vengeance must be taken.
It is out of your hands-- and mine.
Only Xandra can prevent it. And so I ask again.
What will the Shi'ar offer to take the place of their own blood?
I offer fire.

My fire--an inferno that will burn your pathetic Alliance where it lies if you dare to stand against your betters.
Rejoice, bold men of the Shi'ar. Raise your swords--and sing your hosannas.
Your King has returned.

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GALACTIC SOCIETY IS MOVING TOWARD A STATE OF TOTAL WAR OR TOTAL PEACE.
EITHER WAY, THE SOL SYSTEM IS UNDERREPRESENTED AND VULNERABLE.
WE NEED TO TAKE OUR PROPER PLACE ON THE GALACTIC STAGE.
THIS IS A LIVING DOCUMENT FOR SOLVING THAT PROBLEM.

PHASE ONE: CULTIVATE AND PREPARE USEFUL ALLIES.

KRAKOA -- New Mutant Nation, founded by the X-Men. This is a PRIORITY ALLIANCE for various reasons:

- They've been useful in the past -- they talk tough but they're easily swayed and seldom ask questions.
- An entire nation of mutants is a limitless resource if properly controlled and directed.
- My on-off personal relationship with Henry McCoy/Beast may be useful.
- Gabriel Summers/Vulcan would be Krakoan royalty if he returned -- and he was the most disruptive force in galactic politics in a generation. Black Bolt returned from the Fault -- Vulcan could have survived as well.
- If so: the Vulcan strategy is to RETRIEVE, REPROGRAM and PLACE WITHIN KRAKOA.

ORBIS STELLARIS is an arms dealer specializing in xeno-genetics. He's discreet, and apparently has the means to do what I need done -- secure Vulcan and make him docile until we need him to be his old self again -- in return for credits up front and favors down the line. I think we can do business.

PHASE TWO: SIEZE OPPORTUNITIES.

- Krakoa is more useful that I'd have thought possible.
- The "X OF SWORDS" incident led to the retrieval of a lost S.W.O.R.D. Station [*cross-ref: "VESCORI"*] and a massive influx from a new and non-civilized mutant population. Only a matter of time before the obvious solution presents itself -- a local terraforming strategy.
- Meanwhile, following the "EMPYRE" incident, the galaxy is moving toward a "TOTAL PEACE" scenario with a side order of "ECONOMIC COLLAPSE" -- couldn't be better.
- The time to move is NOW.

PHASE THREE: CONSOLIDATE POWER.

- Quit Alpha Flight. Ensure my replacement is predictable -- if not, make plans to remove them.
- Pitch turning Krakoa's salvaged S.W.O.R.D. Station into a "mutant space agency." They'll say yes -- they're high on their own hype.
- Use "mutant circuits" to forge/gather meta-materials to force a "galactic economic miracle." Further macro-events [*cross-ref: "SNARKWAR," "KNULL"*] will only increase the need for that.
- Use the goodwill from saving the economy to get True System status for Sol -- along with a representative seat on the Galactic Council.
- Once the mutants terraform Mars -- and they WILL terraform Mars -- pitch that as the new Sol "capital world." The seat of power.
- Approach ORCHIS for an alliance off the back of that. Sacrifice a pawn if necessary. ORCHIS are shortsighted zealots -- always useful.

PHASE FOUR: TRIGGER CRISIS.

- Encourage friction between the Arakkii and the diplomatic/scientific community. The more tension there is, the easier it is to impose martial law when the hammer drops.
- Prime the Vulcan asset. Resurrection should break the "docility" programming and fully restore the Emperor Vulcan personality.
- Take advantage of events. Mutants stealing Mars will paint a target on their backs -- someone will take their shot. WHEN that happens -- not if -- is the time to strike, while Arakko is weakened.
- Leak the Shi'ar's "Shapeless Ridge" data to the Alliance, then pitch Sol -- ally to both factions -- as an obvious mediator. Host talks.
- During the talks, set Vulcan loose against Xandra. No matter who kills who, we're looking at galactic war within the week -- a civil war among the Shi'ar while both sides fight off the Kree/Skrull Alliance. Other Galactic factions will undoubtedly be drawn in.

PHASE FIVE: CRISIS BECOMES ADVANTAGE.

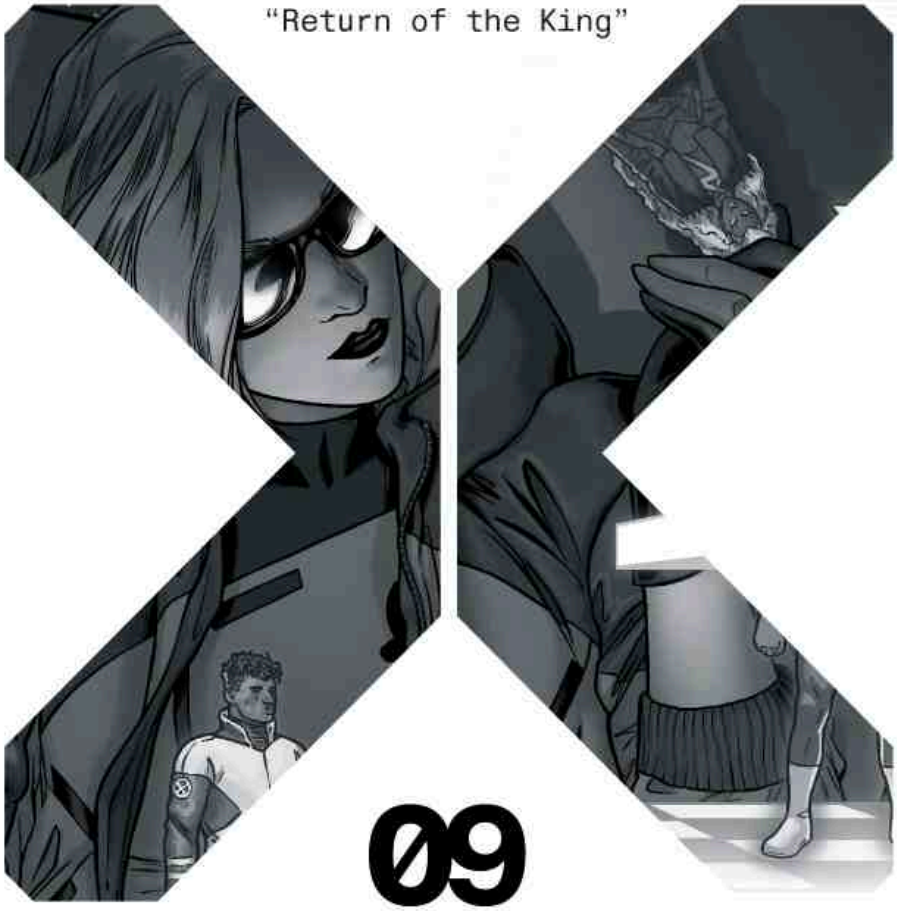
- Guilt the X-Men. They accepted Vulcan, they're responsible. They'll be frontline soldiers and mediators with the Shi'ar. Either the Arakkii fall in line as well, or (more likely) I can coerce the X-Men into forcing them back to Amenth, leaving Mars as a pure Diplomatic World -- S.W.O.R.D.'s first Global Station.
- The new S.W.O.R.D. takes the role of S.H.I.E.L.D. -- a global defense agency -- absorbing ORCHIS in the process. Then we approach Fury's contact list. The Avengers, the FF, anyone with pull on the Kree and the Skrulls. Our role is the voice of reason -- forcing the two sides to the negotiating table. The carrot and the stick in one.
- It'll take time. But when the dust settles, S.W.O.R.D. -- and Sol -- will be everything they were always meant to be.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED.

And that's check and mate.
To be continued!

NEXT

"Return of the King"



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